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Strategy is not something municipalities have, it is something they do

*Author: Prof. dr. Bert George,
Professor of Public Management at Ghent University (Belgium),
external expert to the U-LEAD with Europe Programme*

Over the past months the U-LEAD with Europe Programme in collaboration with external experts has collected a variety of data on strategic leadership and management in Ukrainian municipalities (hromadas). A series of workshops were conducted with regional advisors and these were complemented with case studies of 16 hromadas to identify how the municipalities currently “do” strategic leadership and management. While this report resulted in a number of recommendations, one important observation stands out: **What exactly do we call “a strategy”? Is it a document? A plan? A process?** The answer to this question is not as straightforward as one might assume, yet answering this question is vital if we want to encourage municipalities to think and act more strategically.

Traditionally, a strategy has often been narrowed down to just being a document, a written-down plan in which the hromada explains what it wants to achieve in the coming years and how it will do so. An example here is the development strategy that municipalities have been working on, which sets out their objectives in terms of socio-economic development and how they will meet these objectives. Other examples include more sector-related strategies, such as strategies specifically for the education or healthcare sector. But what happens when multiple strategies “co-exist”? Or, in other words, when documents and plans overlap and many different strategies emerge within the same municipality, all of which requiring funding, all of which considered a priority? Based on the case studies, we uncovered that some municipalities even have up to four different documents and plans that they call their strategy without these documents and plans necessarily being linked to one another nor having clear priorities concerning what needs to be done first, how and why.

Apart from having all of these documents and plans, another issue pops up in terms of emerging challenges and changes – one needs only think about COVID-19’s impact – and how these influence these documents and plans, or, better said, how they make these documents and plans obsolete. Changing priorities, new legislation, etc. require strategy to be adaptable, prepared for a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, and not some static document that requires a lot of time (and thus resources) to develop and eventually ends up gathering dust in the drawers of leaders’ offices. Indeed, such “strategies” might only exist for legitimacy purposes – **the municipality needs to have a document and plan based on legislation or other budgetary requirements.**

The perspective of strategy as static, fixed documents and plans is not very strategic. Strategy could become synonymous with red tape – another document and plan we need to write. Stacking documents and plans upon one another makes it difficult to understand what the real priorities are across the different policy domains of the municipality and which capabilities the municipality needs to develop first to meet these priorities. It also dilutes the principle of strategy, which is not about writing documents and plans but about thinking and acting strategically and continuously – so not only when writing a plan – about the overall value the municipality wants to create (and for who), the priorities and goals it needs to address to create this value, and the specific actions it takes to achieve priorities and goals. Indeed, it should be no surprise that our results show some confusion and frustration towards strategy among municipalities – in part due to strategy being equated to all of these documents and plans that they need to develop as part of changing regulations or other reforms imposed upon them.

So how can we advance strategy in hromadas? **Strategy should not be considered as something municipalities have, a document and a plan, but rather as something they do.** Leaders in municipalities have to continuously identify whether they are creating value for their stakeholders, whether their goals or priorities are still relevant in a changing world, whether specific actions are still feasible and whether new ideas might pop up from within the municipality or among its stakeholders that could help the municipality perform better. In other words, to really do strategy leaders in municipalities need to always consider their core purpose – **the value they create for their stakeholders – when taking decisions (purposeful strategy), decisions need to actually be implementable taking into account limited resources and priorities (implementable strategy)**, and trends and challenges as well as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the municipality need to be considered when taking decisions (adaptable strategy). To be able to do all of this, leaders need to empower their team and delegate responsibilities, they need to create space to focus on strategic decisions as opposed to operational decisions. This space is crucial if local leaders want to become better strategists.